

The Doctrine of Christianity on the Subject of War.

A

S E R M O N,

PREACHED AT THE CONSECRATION OF THE COLOURS
PRESENTED BY THE HONORABLE MRS. PEACHEY
TO THE ROYSTON AND BARKWAY VOLUNTEER CORPS,
THURSDAY, AUGUST 1, 1799.

By GEORGE LAW, M. A.
PREBENDARY OF CARLISLE.

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L. B. B. B.

from the Author

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THESE ARE THE BOOKS

London:

James S. COOPER and WILSON,

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CAMBRIDGE.

To the Honourable Mrs. PEACHEY,

To the Captain,

Officers, and Privates,

OF THE

ROYTSTON and BARKWAY VOLUNTEER CORPS,

THIS SERMON,

Preached and published at their particular request,

Is inscribed,

BY

Their obedient, humble Servant,

THE AUTHOR.

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A

S E R M O N.

Epistle to the Ephesians, Chap. vi. Ver. 13.

Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

AMONGST that infinite variety of arguments by which the truth of our religion is attested, few have greater weight, or are more easily comprehended, than those which are drawn from the universality or abstractedness of the Christian precepts. To prove the genuineness of the sacred writings, is a work both of labour and learning. To demonstrate the truth of a prophecy, requires a knowledge of the sacred languages, and of ancient and modern history: but the evidence arising from the general and exclusive nature of the commandments of our Saviour, when once presented to our view, is immediately convincing and undeniable.—Such, for instance, are the doctrines which relate to Government and War. An impostor, what-

ever might have been his motives for engaging in the undertaking—whether vanity, interest, or self-delusion; anxious for its promotion and success, would have accommodated his religion to the habits and passions of those to whom it was addressed. Well knowing the national pride of the Jews, and their aversion to the Roman yoke, like the false prophets which afterwards arose, he would have favoured their prejudices, or headed their insurrections: whereas our Saviour commanded them to pay tribute unto Cæsar, and to obey the ordinances of man, for the Lord's sake. The Christian Legislator, without any adaptation to the then present circumstances, left general rules; the utility of which have hitherto been experienced under every mode of government, and which tend to prevent the excesses and abuses of any which may hereafter arise, in the lapse of ages.

The same observation may be extended to those doctrines of our Saviour which relate to War. The Jews, eagerly expecting a temporal deliverer, with difficulty comprehended, and reluctantly admitted the idea of a spiritual kingdom. Of these wishes and expectations an impostor would naturally have availed himself, to his own advantage—upon them would have attempted to raise the throne of a triumphant Messiah. Our Saviour, however, neglecting all local prejudices, disregarding all temporary advantages, considered the future and important interests, not of one particular nation, but of the whole race of mankind. He has, therefore, with admirable wisdom and foresight, left no specific directions on the subject of War. He did not state in what cases it was, or was not lawful to appeal to arms. The general tendency of his doctrine is, to promote Peace on Earth and Good-will among

Men. If his precepts were universally received and obeyed, War would no longer desolate the earth; the sword would be turned into the ploughshare; and every one would live in peace, under his own vine, and his own fig-tree.

The Christian precepts inculcate this general benevolence, and universal philanthropy. They eradicate the seeds of War, and mitigate its horrors where it unfortunately prevails. Still, however, while mankind are subject to such a variety of evil passions, while many nations are ignorant of the laws of Christianity, and some who receive, are yet little influenced by them—in this state of society, War in no part of the gospel is absolutely forbidden, though we must pursue every means, and make many sacrifices in order to avoid it. If, divided as the world is, into those who believe in Christianity, and those who believe it not, the good were to yield tamely, and without resistance, to the efforts of the wicked, Vice would soon be universally triumphant, and the fear and knowledge of God rooted out from the face of the earth.

Against this doctrine it has been alledged, to alarm and confound the ignorant, that our Saviour says, “Unto him that smiteth thee on the one cheek, offer the other also: and him that taketh away thy cloak, forbid not to take thy coat also.” This principle of love even to our enemies, of charity and forbearance to all, is one of the noblest and most discriminating precepts of our holy religion. These, however, and a variety of similar injunctions, are not to be understood in too strict and insulated a sense. Many allowances are to be made, and much latitude is to be given, to the freedom of the Oriental languages. If the Commandments of our Saviour are taken

in their literal meaning, many difficulties and contradictions would arise, all of which are removed by a fair and liberal interpretation. In the case before us, our Saviour never meant, that his disciples should submit their property or their lives to the violence of an assassin, but, under a strong figure, endeavoured to inculcate a principle of meekness, of submission to oppression, of forbearance even under insults, when the happiness of mankind was promoted by it; that our enemies, seeing our good works, might glorify our common Father which is in Heaven.

It is in like manner said, that "it is easier for a Camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God." That is, hard indeed was the task, and great the danger to which wealth exposed the first converts to Christianity. Difficult therefore, but by no means impossible, was it, for a rich man to be saved.

From this review of the doctrine concerning Resistance, it appears, that we are left by Christianity, under the guidance of good principles, to the exercise of our own discretion. A strict and solemn examination must be made, the necessity must be great and irresistible, before we are justified in an appeal to Arms. Let us then proceed to consider, how far we are sanctioned by the principles of Morality and Justice, in entering into or carrying on that arduous contest, in which we are at present engaged.

And here, it cannot but be acknowledged, that the objects for which we are contending, are our Constitution, our Property, and Religion. Against all of these the efforts of the enemy are directed; and a brief examination of each of them will convince us, that it is an indispensable duty to transmit

unimpaired to our Posterity, the noble inheritance we have received from our Ancestors.

The excellence of the Constitution established in these realms, is best seen, by viewing its effects. Have we not flourished, under it, to a degree hitherto unexampled in the annals of the world? Has not Commerce brought every production of the most distant climes into our Ports? And have not our Manufactures obtained an unrivalled superiority over those of every other Nation upon the earth? Has not Justice been administered with the most equal impartiality? Have not the lower ranks of society enjoyed all the necessaries of life? Has not luxury prevailed among the higher, at least as much as the moralist could wish? And has not this century been distinguished by the greatest of all national blessings, the almost uninterrupted enjoyment of internal peace? In short, we shall not find any nation, in any period, which has obtained a greater portion of prosperity and happiness, than has been possessed by the Inhabitants of this favoured isle.

For all these blessings we are indebted, under Providence, to our invaluable Constitution, which incites labour, and stimulates exertion, by affording equal protection to all. Whatever is obtained by industry, is secured by Law. If such then are the experienced effects of our established Constitution, is it not our interest as well as duty to defend it? Or shall we adopt a vain theory in its stead, when by its fruits we have known it? Whatever political disputes therefore may have arisen, and with whatever warmth they may have been carried on, it is now incumbent upon us to forget all lesser differences in our common danger, and, like mariners when the storm threatens, we

should unite in one joint effort to preserve the vessel, on which depends the safety of all.

To those who are duly impressed with a belief of the divine origin of our Religion, few arguments are necessary to shew the justice of the contest in which we are engaged, and the obligation we are under to sacrifice every thing, even life itself, in defence of the Religion delivered to us by Christ. Christianity alone can support us amidst all the changes and chances of this mortal life; and, what is far beyond all this, Christianity alone brings Immortality to light. And shall we then exchange this, our hope and consolation, for the sad prospect of an eternal sleep—for the belief, that after a life of pain and misery, we shall be no more, but lose for ever all consciousness of existence, with the beasts that perish? If the fears and hopes of Christianity are extinguished, what barrier can withstand the inroad of Vice? Why, the generality of mankind will exclaim, should we not indulge each rising passion that seeks for gratification, if to-morrow we die? If such are the dreadful but necessary consequences of a disbelief in Christianity, all who admit its divine origin, though they may differ among themselves on some points of faith or practice, yet are still equally called upon to unite in the defence of what is most dear and valuable upon earth. Though the State with prudence and wisdom has given a preference and maintenance to one sect, to prevent perpetual rivalry and contest; yet complete toleration is afforded to the rest. Every one may worship God, according to the mode which reason dictates, and conscience prescribes. No limitations are imposed but what a greater good requires.

But here it may be objected by the advocates of the enemy, if such there are, that the public renunciation of a Deity has been atoned for by a subsequent disavowal—that it was a temporary frenzy and disgrace. We have, however, too much reason to believe, that their system of faith is always adapted to the purposes of ambition, and that they embrace with equal facility, and behold with the like indifference, the religion of Mahomet or Christ.

Having shewn the danger to which our Constitution and Religion are exposed, it is scarcely necessary to prove, that a love of plunder has been the ruling motive with our enemy, in all the wars they have undertaken. If they had merely subverted the Government of the Countries they over-ran, if they had left the inhabitants in the undisturbed possession of their property, it might then have been alledged, that a sincere though visionary idea of freedom, that a wish to diffuse the blessings of liberty, formed their motive and their object. But this defence cannot now be advanced by their warmest supporters. Every country they have conquered, has been a prey to confiscation and rapine. The Throne and the Altar have not only been subverted, but plundered; and we may trace their march, like that of a pestilence, by the ruin and desolation of the inhabitants. Alas! they even spared not a sister Republic, which, amidst the wilds of Nature, still had been happy for ages in the enjoyment of freedom, which, through all the revolutions of its more powerful neighbours, still remained the favoured asylum of Liberty. If it escaped not, what would have been our lot? If they forbore not from oppressing an ancient ally, protected by their Mountains, and Poverty, would they have refrained from attacking a proud rival, whose wealth allured

them to her shores? Little doubt can remain of the destiny which would have awaited us, if we had placed our reliance upon their promises, more than our own strength. And it may not be without its use, to view the situation in which we should have stood, if we had not rendered ourselves impregnable to the attacks of our enemy. Our national prosperity is erected on the basis of commerce and credit. The wealth which, through various channels, thus flows into the country, has not only given an unrivalled superiority to our Manufactures, but also supplies the capital by which Agriculture is improved, and, like the blood in the human frame, circulates through and gives vigour to the whole system. As long as this national character is supported, we shall continue to thrive and flourish. It is, however, a plant, not of a hardy, but luxuriant growth; and on the least blight it withers and decays. A kingdom whose wealth arises from the productions of its soil, may be subdued by hostile armies, and, after a temporary distress, may still regain its former vigour: But a Nation whose prosperity depends upon its Commerce, upon the opinion entertained of its Credit by other people, when deprived of these, loses what it never can regain. Thus Britain, if she had not preserved her independence, would have been deprived of her credit, and, with it, of every source of wealth—would have been reduced to the situation of a neighbouring Republic, once a rival for the empire of the Seas, and would have fallen for ever from that pinnacle, which has been gradually erected by her Sons.

And while we thus acknowledge with gratitude the numerous blessings already received, let us again offer up our thanksgivings to the Throne of Grace, for that signal victory of which we are at this time naturally reminded. On this memorable

day, our enemies felt the superiority of the British Navy in distant seas, and another Armada was subdued by the skill and valour of our Mariners. To this important event, a great portion of the globe is indebted for its deliverance, from Anarchy and Oppression. But the circumstance which reflects the greatest lustre on the Nation, is the spirit of piety and religion which was displayed on the occasion. Great, we acknowledge, was the heroism of the Commander; but still his highest honour was, that he gave God the praise.

But though this occasion and our duty thus compel us to incite you to the defence of our Liberties and Religion, yet let it not hence be inferred, that the English Clergy either wish to encourage a spirit of animosity, or fan the flames of war—While they cannot but be sensible of, still they lament this necessity, which the times impose on them; nor do I express my own sentiments alone when I affirm, that they, of all men, with the greatest pleasure, would hail the return of peace. Suffer me, then, which is more peculiarly within our province, to point out some of the duties incumbent upon those who thus nobly step forward in defence of their country.

It has been our sorrow and shame, that in the 18th century of the Christian æra, we have witnessed cruelty and crimes, which would have disgraced a savage nation, in the most barbarous times. Let such atrocities have one good effect, by serving for our admonition. Let our conduct exhibit a contrast to that which we condemn. Humanity has always been the brightest ornament of the Military character. Let us convince the world, that Christianity, though it cannot at present extinguish, may still alleviate all the horrors of War; and that, while plunder and cruelty are enlisted under the banners of our

enemy, that benevolence and humanity are the characteristics of a British Soldier.

Many of the sanguinary excesses we have deplored, have arisen from a want of order and submission, which, gradually pervading all ranks, had at length prevailed in the army of our enemy. The murder of their own officers, and the pillage of the defenceless inhabitants, were consequences to be expected, and which followed. A compliance, however, with a rule, a sense of subordination, and obedience to the commands of superiors, are the duties of all professions, but peculiarly of your's. Without these, nothing honourable can be achieved: for laurels are not obtained by numbers, but by discipline.

It is almost unnecessary for me to recommend unanimity and zeal for the dearest interests of your Country. The honourable manner in which you have dedicated yourselves to its service, affords the best proof which can be given, of your patriotism and loyalty. Nor could any thing reflect a greater lustre on the spirit of the Nation, than these the Voluntary Associations of the best of her citizens: For they consist not of hireling troops, which would fight for any despot in any cause, which are kept apart from the rest of their fellow-citizens, that they may not catch their patriotism and zeal; but they are a body of Men, who, without any private advantages, have sacrificed many; who, still living intermixed with their brethren, partake of and express the general sentiments and feeling; and who have deducted a portion of time from the duties and calls of their profession, that they might be enabled more effectually to defend the interest of themselves and of all. These honourable Associations form our best security and defence. Protected by them, we may defy the power and malice of external foes; and, what

is of equal importance, we are thus secured against the plots and machinations of those, amongst ourselves, who wish well to the cause of our Enemies. The spirit which was first displayed in this kingdom, seems now to have pervaded the rest of Europe; and we may rejoice in the prospect of its deliverance from anarchy and plunder. Let us not, however, in the hour of triumph, forget the evils we have escaped, or to whose Almighty hand we are indebted for our deliverance. The awful events which have passed before our eyes, should afford an instructive lesson to ourselves, and to ages yet unborn. We must be wilfully blind, not to acknowledge, that a laxity of principles, and a spirit of infidelity, have been the primary causes of all the evils which have deluged the civilized world. Religion therefore alone can administer the cure, and heal the wounds which Infidelity has opened. Nations, like individuals, may gain a temporary success by fraud and rapine, but can never acquire permanent strength and stability, unless their character is supported by Integrity and Justice: The former resembles an edifice erected on the sands: Against the latter, built upon a rock, in vain the winds roar, and the tempest bursts.

In admirable wisdom, therefore, do our Governors connect religion with every civil and military institution; and, considered in this view, such ceremonies as we have now witnessed are not without their use. They tend to instill a principle of religion—a sense of our dependence upon God;—they remind you of his omnipresence and power;—they teach you to consider the justice of your cause—they inspire you with valour to defend it.

We dismiss you, then, with the hope and prayer, that the Banners which have now been consecrated at the Altar, may

never be tarnished or disgraced. Every motive which can influence the heart of man, impel you forwards in the path of duty. You are maintaining the rights of a King, enthroned in the hearts of his Subjects. You are defending the possessions and liberty of your country. You are preserving its Altars from sacrilege and plunder. In addition to all these motives for ennobling the Banners which you have this day received, let me add an obligation which never can be without its weight—the honoured name and exemplary virtues of Her who has presented them.

Go, then, if called upon, into the field of honour; and may success and glory attend you! Convince mankind, that the valour which is inspired by patriotism and religion, is invincible. The blessings of your Country will go with you; and when this contest shall have secured to us the return of Peace, you will ever after reflect, with pleasing satisfaction, on your having thus nobly discharged your duty both to God and man. That these efforts of yourselves, and others united in the same honourable cause, may speedily produce this much-wished-for effect, let us humbly offer up our prayers to that Almighty Being, in whose hands alone are the issues of War.

FINIS.

